From Oblivion to Life: The Recovery of Intangible Cultural Heritage through the Anti-Aircraft Shelters of the Spanish Civil War

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Abstract: This article examines the rehabilitation of anti-aircraft shelters from the Spanish Civil War in Alicante, Spain. Funded by European resources and managed by local public administration, these shelters have been restored as cultural and tourist attractions. This study aims to analyze their role in preserving and promoting intangible cultural heritage, with a focus on their significance as tangible remnants of a historical period and their reflection on survival practices during the war. This research investigates the impact of public management in rehabilitating these shelters and in disseminating their history and culture. It explores decision-making processes, community engagement, and strategies for promoting cultural tourism. Employing a mixed methodology, this study gathers primary data through interviews with individuals who witnessed the war and secondary data from documentary and bibliographic sources. Findings suggest that the rehabilitation of these shelters has been pivotal in preserving Alicante's historical memory and cultural heritage. Making the shelters accessible to the public facilitates knowledge transmission about the Spanish Civil War, promotes cultural tourism, and engages the local community in the dissemination of history and culture. This study's results and conclusions are relevant for academics, professionals, and cultural heritage managers at both national and international levels, offering insights into the effective preservation and promotion of historical sites.

Keywords: cultural heritage preservation; Spanish civil war education; sustainable cultural tourism

1. Introduction

1.1. Preservation of Historical Memory and Cultural Identity

The preservation of historical memory and cultural identity is crucial for community development, cultural tourism, and sustainability. Cities with historical and cultural legacies attract tourism, driving economic and social development while preserving their heritage and cultural identity. The conservation of sites and historical monuments is fundamental for understanding the evolution of the city [1].

The preservation of historical memory includes tangible elements and the collection of personal testimonies through interviews, documents, and photographs, contributing to archives and museums. These narratives enrich historical understanding and strengthen cultural identity, while cultural preservation promotes traditions and education to maintain identity among future generations [1].

1.2. Historical Context: The Air-Raid Shelters of the Spanish Civil War in Alicante and the Second World War

The failed coup d'état of 1936 in Spain against the Government of the Second Spanish Republic initiated a civil war and a dictatorship until 1975 under the orders of Francisco Franco. During the conflict (1936–1939), Spain experienced bombings from Nazi Germany

and Fascist Italy, resulting in over 500,000 deaths and devastation, especially in coastal cities like Alicante, a strategic enclave [2,3], being the last province to be conquered.

Starting in November 1936, Alicante faced intense bombings, including the significant '8-h bombing' on November 28. Faced with a shortage of air-raid shelters, they were built in densely populated and strategic areas, equipped with surveillance systems, alarms, and telephone communications. The distribution of these shelters was based on population density and proximity to essential services [2]. By August 1937, Alicante had 41 shelters, with a capacity for 24,020 people [3]. The increase in number, quality, and size of the shelters during the war reflects the escalation of bombings, especially in 1938, marked by the attack on the Central Market on May 25. This event drove an improvement in the city's organizational capacity for defense, resulting in the construction of nearly a hundred shelters [3].

The air-raid shelters were specifically designed to protect the civilian population from bombings. For instance, a study documents the design of private air-raid shelters aimed at safeguarding civilians, analyzing the materials, construction methods, and structural systems of these shelters during the Spanish Civil War [4].

During the Second World War, a study examined the effectiveness of various air-raid shelters, including those used during the Spanish Civil War, with a focus on experiences from Great Britain and Spain. This study highlighted their significance in civil protection, symbolizing resistance and the survival of the population [5,6].

1.3. The Upcycling Process: Impact of Public Management in Shelter Rehabilitation

In our project, we employ the concept of upcycling, which involves the creative and sustainable transformation of existing spaces to serve new purposes. Rather than discarding or demolishing these spaces, upcycling aims to maximize available resources while minimizing environmental impact [7–17].

The air-raid shelters from the Nazi era in Szczecin, Poland, pose a significant planning challenge for the city due to their historical association with World War II [7]. The experience of rehabilitating the air-raid shelters in Szczecin, Poland, provides a valuable parallel for the study of the shelters in Alicante, as it demonstrates how the subsequent history of their existence can extend beyond mere heritage restoration. In the case of Szczecin, the revitalization of the shelters was not only focused on preserving their historical structure but also actively sought to reanimate the neighborhoods and surrounding areas through various activities implemented within them. In this regard, the current rehabilitation of the shelters in Alicante has adopted a similar strategy that not only preserves the heritage but also promotes the reactivation of the surrounding areas through community-involving activities that generate a long-term positive impact on the city. This strategy aligns with one of the objectives of the European funding period from which the project has been financed: the economic, social, and cultural revitalization of its influence zone.

This process of space upcycling involves innovative thinking and the reuse of materials, structures, and existing features within these shelters. Examples include converting old buildings into residences or workspaces, repurposing warehouses as event venues, or rejuvenating abandoned gardens into community parks [12,13].

Furthermore, space upcycling can encompass the integration of sustainable technologies such as solar panels, rainwater harvesting systems, or natural ventilation systems. These additions enhance energy efficiency and environmental friendliness within the space [7,11,15].

Ultimately, space upcycling represents a creative and conscious approach to rejuvenating existing spaces, making the most of available resources while reducing environmental impact [17].

1.4. Study Objectives

This study focuses on analyzing the contribution of the rehabilitation of air-raid refuge to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in Alicante, Spain. It involves exploring their role as witnesses of the Spanish Civil War, examining interviews with individuals

who experienced the war as children to understand how their restoration and opening to the public help maintain historical memory and local cultural identity. Furthermore, it will evaluate the impact of public management on the rehabilitation and promotion of their history and culture, including the analysis of financial decisions, community involvement, and strategies to promote cultural tourism.

2. Materials and Methods

In the design of this research on the rehabilitation of air-raid shelters from the Spanish Civil War in Alicante, a mixed methodological approach was adopted to encompass both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study [18]. This dual-front methodology was chosen to capture the complexity and depth of the impact of rehabilitation from a holistic perspective that integrates architectural, historical, and sociocultural data.

2.1. Research Design

The research was structured in two complementary phases: the collection of primary data through interviews with direct witnesses of the Civil War and the compilation of secondary data through the review of historical documents, restoration reports, and the analysis of cultural tourism indicators. The primary data came from structured interviews conducted following a predetermined set of questions to ensure coherence and comparability of the collected information. These interviews focused on gathering personal narratives and perceptions about life experiences during the war and the use of the shelters [19,20].

On the other hand, secondary data were extracted from reliable and reviewed documentary sources, which provided a broad context on the architecture of the shelters, their historical significance, and their role in the collective memory of Alicante [3].

Quantitative information about the extent of the rehabilitation and the increase in cultural tourism, such as figures on rehabilitated surface area and visitor statistics, was included to demonstrate the direct impact of the intervention on the shelters [21].

2.2. Justification of the Methodology

The choice of interviews and hermeneutic analysis as the main methods were guided by the nature of the study's subject. The interviews provided a direct means to access lived experiences and individual perceptions, vital for understanding the intangible significance that the shelters hold for those who lived through the Civil War era [3]. Hermeneutic analysis was chosen for its ability to deeply interpret witness narratives, offering a richer and more detailed understanding of the underlying meanings. This approach allowed for the unraveling of layers of meaning in personal narratives, relating them to a broader cultural context and connecting the past with present interpretations. The combination of these methods provided a solid foundation for a holistic and dynamic interpretation of the shelters as spaces of cultural memory. It allowed for an assessment of how rehabilitation has transformed these spaces into instruments of education and tourism, and how they contribute to the construction of a renewed cultural identity and collective memory [22]. Therefore, the mixed methodological approach and the use of interviews and hermeneutic analysis have been essential for achieving a comprehensive understanding of the role of the air-raid shelters in the cultural fabric of Alicante, ensuring that the study's conclusions are supported by a rigorous and appropriate methodological framework.

2.3. Research Approach

The analysis of the collected data was carried out systematically and rigorously, employing qualitative analysis techniques [23,24]. Patterns, trends, and relationships within the data were examined to address the research objectives. The results obtained are presented clearly and concisely, supported by empirical evidence, and contextualized within the existing theoretical framework with hermeneutic analysis [25–27].

In the realm of interpretative qualitative research, hermeneutics, which focuses on analyzing the cultural context of texts and cultural expressions, plays a crucial role [28]. Within this context, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) stands out as a qualitatively

significant method [29–31]. Within the framework of IPA, the selection of interviews has been conducted for meticulous analysis using Atlas.ti software v. 24. Combining textual, contextual, and cultural analysis, it concludes with a comprehensive hermeneutic interpretation.

2.4. Primary Data Collection: Interviews with War Witnesses and Hermeneutic Analysis

This research, therefore, will use a hermeneutic approach to analyze interviews related to the air-raid shelters of the Spanish Civil War in Alicante. It will explore personal perceptions and emotions, such as fear and uncertainty, and daily life during wartime conditions to understand the human impact of the shelters. Changes in routines and urban structures will be examined, along with the interaction with the physical space of the shelters and the long-term emotional and psychological impact. Furthermore, it will study how these narratives contribute to historical memory and the perception of the shelters, seeking interpretations beyond the explicit.

Therefore, to significantly enrich the hermeneutic analysis in the context of our study on the air-raid shelters of the Spanish Civil War, it is necessary to address the following issues:

- Cultural Semiotics: this approach is useful for unraveling the meanings of symbols and metaphors in the interviewee's narratives [32].
- Cultural Comparison: comparing the interview narratives with other perceptions and expectations of that era [33] can provide a more comprehensive insight into how the shelters were perceived and experienced in different cultural and social contexts.
- Hermeneutics Proper: On one hand, Contextual Interpretation is an essential approach to understanding testimonies in their historical and cultural context [34].
- Critical Reflection: on the other hand, the analysis will include questioning biases, as it is crucial to be aware of our prejudices and perspectives when analyzing these interviews [35].

The IPA focuses on exploring how individuals interpret and understand their significant experiences [29,30,36], making it particularly useful for examining how individuals perceive and comprehend events and phenomena, thus allowing for a deep understanding of their subjective experiences [37–39].

2.5. Hermeneutic Analysis of Interviews with Individuals Who Experienced the War

In our research, we have applied hermeneutic analysis to interviews conducted with individuals who spent their childhood in Alicante during the Spanish Civil War. *Due to space limitations, we will briefly introduce the harrowing narrative of a woman over eighty years old, from the San Antón neighborhood, whose experience encapsulates the high scientific potential of these interviews.*

Our findings address various aspects, which we have synthesized into four key categories: Cultural Semiotics, Cultural Comparison, Contextual Interpretation, and Critical Reflection.

Cultural Semiotics reveals that shelters, perceived as sanctuaries of safety, become symbols of tragedy and loss, reflecting the duality and chaos of war. In the community context, shelters stand as monuments to solidarity and collective effort, highlighting the importance of mutual support and resilience. Through Cultural Comparison, we observe that daily routines and family and social dynamics were drastically altered, with shelters playing a central role in everyday life and the perception of safety. Contextual Interpretation shows how the constant threat of war and the need for adaptation transformed the urban infrastructure and social interactions.

In the realm of Critical Reflection, we acknowledge the need to approach these narratives with balance, avoiding projecting current preconceptions onto past experiences, and instead, striving to understand them within their own historical and cultural context.

To facilitate understanding and avoid repetition, we have condensed the findings into Table 1, which summarizes the key values and results identified in our analysis.

Table 1. Table of key values and results identified.

Category	Main Findings
Cultural Semiotics	Shelters as symbols of tragedy and survival.
Cultural Comparison	Alteration of everyday life and perceptions of safety.
Contextual Interpretation	Reconfiguration of urban space and infrastructure.
Critical Reflection	Importance of a balanced and contextual perspective.

We conclude that historical memory and personal narrative are essential for a comprehensive understanding of the human impact of war and that preserving these testimonies enriches both our culture and our understanding of history.

3. Results

3.1. Rehabilitation of Air-Raid Shelters

Under the ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) Operational Program "Sustainable Growth 2014–2020", the Alicante City Council implemented the Integrated Sustainable Urban Development Strategy (EDUSI) "Las Cigarreras Area" for sustainable urban development, co-financed by the European Commission. This project focused on the rehabilitation of air-raid shelters from the Civil War in various neighborhoods, improving their accessibility and contributing to cultural and touristic revitalization. The EDUSI, aligned with the ERDF Thematic Objective 6 (recovery of former industrial, religious, and military spaces), seeks to protect and develop cultural and natural heritage. With a budget of EUR 600,000 and a five-year timeline, the project included the rehabilitation of shelters and activities to reconstruct Historical Memory, aiming to increase sustainable tourism and improve cultural heritage. The first phase involved the planning of the opening and accessibility to six shelters in the Alicante DUSI area. Figure 1.

(**a**)   (**b**)

Figure 1. Air-raid shelters in the EDUSI area: (**a**) photographs of the interior of the R35 Marvá Promenade shelter; (**b**) photographs of the interior of the R69 Tobacco Factory shelter. Own work.

The Project was to be carried out on the following six shelters:

- ○ R35: Paseo Marvá, next to the steps of IES Jorge Juan. Figure 1a.
- ○ R5: Marqués de Molins (formerly Maestro Bretón Street).
- ○ R4: Padre Mariana Street.
- ○ R38: Músico Tordera Square. Figure 2.
- ○ R3: Central Market.
- ○ R69: Tobacco Factory. Figure 1b.

Figure 2. Air-raid shelters in the EDUSI area: photographs of the interior of the R38 Músico Tordera Square shelter and its layout. Own work.

The justification for calculating the area eligible for rehabilitation was developed in several stages. Initially, the first project estimated an intervention in a total area of 544 m^2. Subsequently, this calculation was adjusted in the modified project, which considered an area of 432.36 m^2, to which an extension of 35 square meters was added due to an opening in Marqués de Molins, resulting in a total of 467.36 m^2. In addition, an extra surface not initially documented in Padre Mariana, of 378.64 m^2, was identified, raising the total to 846 square meters.

Regarding the justification for the calculation of the area to be rehabilitated for the year 2023, an intervention in an interior surface of 531.07 m^2 was planned, while the exterior surface, including ramps for universal accessibility and entrance prisms, covered 416.01 m^2.

Finally, the justification for calculating the rehabilitated surface at the end of the project indicates that a total of 963.43 m^2 was rehabilitated. This total comprises 531.07 m^2 of intervention on the interior surface and 432.36 m^2 on the exterior surface.

The specific details of the surfaces and interventions to be carried out offer a clear perspective of the project's scope.

3.2. Strategies for Promoting Cultural Tourism

Once the mnemonic resources of the project (shelters) were rehabilitated, and following the planned programming, we proceeded to the activation of cultural dissemination and dynamization.

Between 2021 and 2022, several activities took place in refurbished anti-aircraft shelters, including installations such as video mapping in Tordera, exhibitions about the history of water in Palmeretes, and historical photographs in Tabacalera, accompanied by a detailed model. Theatrical visits were also conducted, as shown in Figure 3. These initiatives

contribute to the revitalization and promotion of historical heritage through interactive and educational tools.

Figure 3. Theatrical visit in the Port of Alicante area. Self-made.

Specific events have taken place within the rehabilitated shelters, including theatre, music, poetry, dance at Tabacalera, and architectural performances at Marvá. These activities are part of a strategy to enrich the cultural and educational experience, diversifying artistic expressions and enhancing historical heritage (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Micro-theatre in the anteroom of the tobacco factory air-raid shelter, performed by Vicente de Ramón Producciones. Self-made.

Within the EDUSI project, guided tours to air-raid shelters and historical sites were organized, some of which were theatrical, by the Professional Association of Official Guides of the Valencian Community. Short films about significant local events were produced, and educational materials were published, including a comic book for young people. Additionally, a website (https://refugiosalicante360.com, accessed on 6 February 2024) was launched to provide a virtual and immersive experience of the shelters, featuring photographs, floor plans, and 360-degree views, expanding access to a global audience. Figure 5.

At the Marvá shelter, students, particularly from the second GIAT of the IES Miguel Hernández, have developed guided tours and educational exhibitions, including one about the Holocaust.

The assessment of indicators for scheduled activities and their evolution over time is crucial for the management and planning of cultural resources. Initially, we projected 2000 visitors for the years 2022 and 2023, based on an analysis of historical attendance data

at various cultural facilities in the city. This reference figure served as a starting point for resource and activity planning.

(**a**)   (**b**)
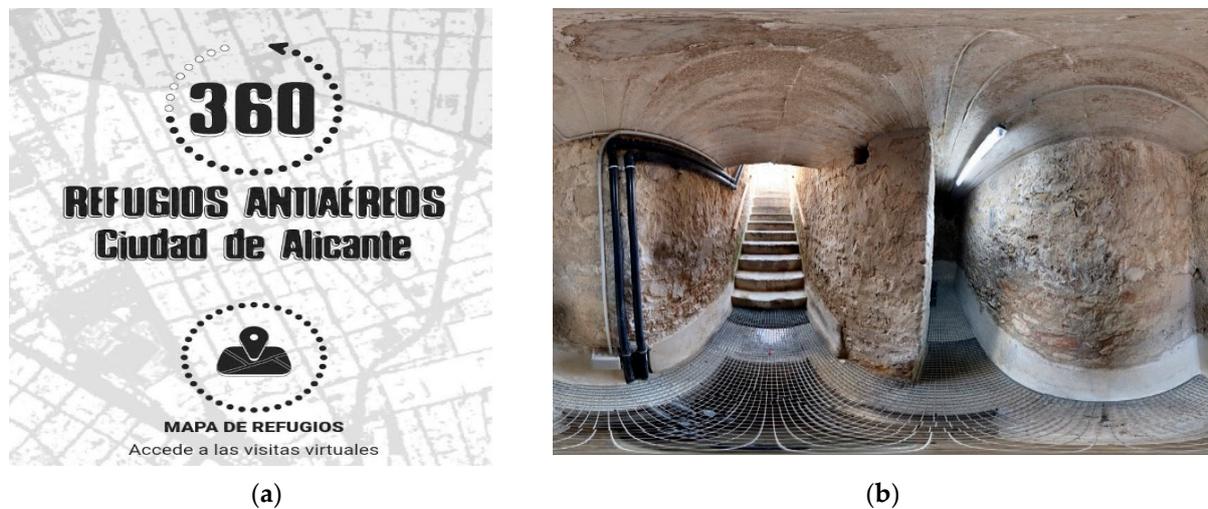
Figure 5. 360-degree virtual tour of the air-raid shelters in the EDUSI area: (**a**) poster and 360-degree photographs of some of the air-raid shelters in Alicante that can be visited on the website https://refugiosalicante360.com (accessed on 6 February 2024); (**b**) 360-degree photograph of the interior of the shelter at Plaza Músico Tordera. Self-made.

In terms of total visits, a total of 5229 people participated in activities during 2022 and the beginning of 2023. This count includes various types of events. Guided tours, organized by the Association of Official Guides of the Valencian Community under a minor contract, constituted a significant portion of the attendance. A breakdown of these guided tours reveals a temporal distribution with 760 visitors between March and August 2022, 644 in November, 336 in December, and an increase to 1732 in the period from April to August 2023, totaling 3472 visitors.

In addition to the guided tours, other cultural dissemination and dynamization activities, as previously mentioned, attracted 999 participants. Similarly, music, theater, and dance events held at the Tabacalera shelter contributed another 758 attendees. The sum of these complementary activities, along with the guided tours, resulted in a total of 5229 attendees.

This substantial increase in attendance, compared to the initial projections, reflects the effectiveness of the programming and promotion strategies implemented by the Alicante City Council in terms of these cultural management initiatives.

3.3. The Cultural Heritage of Memory (CHM) as a Driving Element, Also for the Awareness and Citizen Participation of Adults and Children

Under the DUSI strategy, two objectives were established: to protect and develop cultural and natural heritage in tourist urban areas and to revitalize the area socially, economically, and physically. Faced with the disconnection between residents and their heritage, and the lack of collective identity, a plan for socialization and community involvement was implemented. This plan included environmental, historical, and sustainable workshops, as well as creative activities for children, with a focus on connecting them with Alicante's heritage through imaginary characters based on heritage elements. Figure 6.

(**a**)   (**b**)

Figure 6. Different drawings of the underground air-raid shelters in the city of Alicante, made by students from the public school La Aneja de Alicante: (**a**) drawing of the interior of an air-raid shelter; (**b**) drawing of an air-raid shelter in a public square. Self-made.

4. Conclusions

4.1. Importance of Shelters as Promoters of the Recovery of the Intangible Heritage of the Spanish Civil War

Heritage encompasses current interpretations and symbolism about objects, environments, myths, memories, and customs inherited from the past. It constitutes an essential factor in identity formation, especially in societies characterized by increasing cultural diversity [40–42]. The past is crucial in the creation of identity narratives in the present. The significant influence of monuments and cultural landscapes as spaces of cultural heritage is very important. The view of certain places and constructions with historical value has evolved, as well as their function in the formation and reformulation of specific identities [43]. The air-raid shelters of the Spanish Civil War are an example of this and play a crucial role in the recovery and preservation of the intangible heritage associated with this historical conflict [2,3,44,45]. These underground spaces, used as a refuge by the civilian population during bombings, are tangible witnesses to the experiences of that period, and their rehabilitation and opening to the public allow for reliving and understanding the history and culture of that time [45–47].

Firstly, the air-raid shelters are places that evoke the protective practices and survival strategies that took place during the Spanish Civil War. These underground spaces symbolize the resistance and struggle of the civilian population against bombings and the violence of the war [3]. By rehabilitating and opening these shelters to the public, current and future generations are allowed to learn and understand the strategies used by those who lived during that time, as well as the emotional and psychological impact they had on society [47,48].

The air-raid shelters, as sites of memory from the historical period of the Spanish Civil War, their restoration, and opening promote the preservation of memory and cultural identity in Alicante. They enable a connection with the past and an understanding of its influence on current society and culture [48]. Furthermore, visiting the air-raid shelters can generate a sense of empathy and solidarity with the people who lived through those difficult times, thus fostering appreciation and respect for the intangible heritage of the civil war [49].

Finally, the rehabilitation of the air-raid shelters and their opening to the public contribute to promoting cultural tourism and disseminating the history and culture associated with the Spanish Civil War. These spaces become tourist attractions that draw visitors interested in learning and understanding the history and culture of Alicante during the

Civil War. This, in turn, generates economic and social benefits for the local community, promoting sustainable development and the valorization of its cultural heritage [44,48].

4.2. Depth and Scope of the Project

The rehabilitation of the Spanish Civil War air-raid shelters in Alicante has proven to be a significant cultural and architectural intervention, reflected not only in the physical preservation of historical spaces but also in the revitalization of sustainable tourism and heritage education. The justification for calculating the rehabilitated surface area, which reached 963.43 m^2 in 2023, and the increase in visitor attendance, totaling 5229 people during 2022 and early 2023, is indicative of the project's success.

The expansion of the rehabilitated areas, from an initial estimate of 544 m^2 to 963.43 m^2, not only maximized the educational potential of the shelters but also underscored effective and adaptive management of urban heritage in response to emerging needs for historical memory and cultural education. The integration of diverse activities, such as guided tours, theatrical performances, and cultural events, has broadened the reach and impact of these spaces, attracted a larger number of visitors, and enriched the educational experience.

These shelters, once symbols of conflict and survival, have been transformed into dynamic platforms for learning and reflection. The cultural and educational programming carried out at these sites has significantly contributed to the increase in the number of visits, exceeding initial expectations with a total of 5229 visits, compared to the anticipated 2000. This not only validates the initially set objectives but also signals the effectiveness of the actions undertaken to revalue Alicante's intangible cultural heritage.

Therefore, the conclusions of our study are underpinned by a robust methodology, with a diverse and rich database that includes architectural analysis, historical testimonies, and public participation metrics. The synergy between the physical conservation and cultural revitalization of the air-raid shelters has proven to be a successful strategy, evidenced by productivity indicators and positive community reception. This integrative approach can serve as a model for similar projects that seek to combine heritage preservation with education and cultural tourism, ensuring that living history continues to inform and enrich our contemporary societies.

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